

DIVERSITY AND HEALTH AND WELL BEING

Mind Matters

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## DIVERSITY AND HEALTH AND WELL BEING

I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners The Gadigal People of the Eora Nation—the people on whose land we meet today.

Colleagues

I would like to commence by sharing with you, who I am, to allow me to share with you the importance of acknowledging the role all educators have in respect to Diversity and Health and well being.

I am a Noongar man with Yamatji and Wangi heritage.

My father grew up in the Cue – Mount Magnet area whereas my mother spent her childhood growing up in Roelands Mission until she left at the age of 14 to work as a domestic on a number of farms and pastoral stations. She along with her 14 brothers and sisters were part of the Stolen Generation.

I am the oldest of 10 children I spent phases of my life as a child in Bunbury where I was born, before living for five years in the railway town of Nannine, which was 50 kilometres west of Meekatharra. In 1959 my father applied for a transfer to Corrigin, a town in the wheatbelt region south east of Perth. He worked as a Ganger on the line for the Western Australian Government Railway.

I completed ten years of my schooling at Corrigin before the local Rotary Club, instigated by Mr Alan Jones Principal of my school, supported me in completing a further two years of schooling in Perth which enabled me to gain my leaving certificate.

I graduated from Mount Lawley Teachers College as a teacher in 1971 and the rest is a history of opportunity and success.

I hold a personal belief that at times as individuals we are meant to be in specific places at given times to meet particular people or experience an event that enhances our lives which contributes to our individual destinies.

It is through these interactions with others that we are given the opportunity to exchange ideas and information, viewpoints and perspectives and interactions that impact on our lives and the lives of others.

The Community Matters: Stories in Diversity DVD and Hand Book builds on these points and provides a salient message of optimism and resilience, connectedness, trust and safety, empathy and respect and seeking help.

Dr Ken Boston the previous Director General of Education New South Wales in his Indigenous Education Strategic Initiatives Program address at the Novotel Brighton Le Sands, New South Wales acknowledged the importance of a person's culture and I quote: "Now this young woman is bicultural. Her university education, if not her school education, has given her an intercultural passport. She is loyal to her Indigenous and family heritage. She is also a successful product of a period in Australian education in which Indigenous culture and cultural knowledge have been publicly redefined through momentous public and personal events."

Whilst the circumstance of detail may differ the concept equally applies for any child with a culturally diverse background or to those in same sex relationships who grapple with similar challenges and the views of others.

I want to use my experiences to illustrate a number of points and ask that you in your mind consider students within your schools.

I stand before you the unique person I am today shaped by many experiences – both positive and negative.

This person developed from the child that I was many years ago since the time of my birth. Like most children, I was shaped particularly in the early childhood, then later childhood and adolescent years, by both the negative and positive experiences in the environment, in which I lived, was raised and educated. These included my relationships with my family and significant others including extended family and community members, which developed my cultural identity, my spirituality, social, intellectual and emotional self.

My resilience and relationships with teachers, other adults and my peers where affected by my interactions with them and depending upon those relationships my feelings of self-

worth were either enhanced or eroded. Successes and failures that I also experienced raised or lowered my self-esteem and self-confidence.

Some of the negative experiences I had included extreme poverty, hunger, racism, pain, paternalism, bullying, criticisms from others, and disappointments caused by others which I have set aside or forgotten but I know they presented challenges for me to grapple with and overcome.

The positive experiences I cherish and want to remember because they are valuable and helped me to grow and develop into a person of balance, compassion and resolve.

Nonetheless I know that both the positive and negative experiences have helped to shape my future and the pathway I have chosen.

As teachers and educators we make value judgements about particular characteristics of culturally diverse background students and sometimes we perceive these characteristics as different, sometimes as deficiencies and difficulties that have to be managed controlled or we recognise them as being rich and needing to be appreciated. We value them.

Equally we can focus on the negative more readily than we can on the constructive and positive qualities of a person.

Recently in a meeting a peer made a derogatory racial comment about a mutual colleague and I stopped the discussion and asked the person to consider their comment and think about five good qualities about the person they had just criticised. They had little difficulty in extolling five points of virtue. Why is it that we so readily find an unconstructive and critical comment before we consider the strengths of a person or group of people.

To illustrate the impact of these experiences and the impact they had on me as a student, let me share with you a story called “The Fence”.

*“There once was a little boy who had a bad temper. His father gave him a bag of nails and told him that every time he lost his temper her must hammer a nail into the back of the fence. The first day the boy had driven thirty-seven nails into the fence. Over the next few weeks, as he learned to control his anger, the number of*

*nails hammered daily gradually dwindled down. He discovered it was easier to hold his temper than to drive those nails into the fence.*

*Finally, the day came when the boy didn't lose his temper at all. He told his father about it and the father suggested that the boy now pull out one nail for each day that he was able to hold his temper. The days passed and the young boy was finally able to tell his father that all the nails were gone.*

*The father took his son by the hand and led him to the fence. He said, "You have done well, my son, but look at the holes in the fence. The fence will never be the same. When you say things in anger, they leave a scar just like this one. You can put a knife into a man and draw it out. It won't matter how many times you say I'm sorry, the wound is still there.*

*A verbal wound is as bad as a physical one." The also applies when we don't value diversity and treat all children the same.*

Any form of diversity has to be acknowledged and recognised because it is the essence of who we are. It is the manifestation of our intellectual achievement within our culture, which includes our entire range of customs, beliefs, lore, social forms, and material traits of racial, social and religious groups. This encapsulates the challenges for some to acknowledge the emotional and social well being of students who grapple with the enormity of safety around safe sex relationships.

How many times have we heard a colleague say we treat all children equally and we do not distinguish between any groups in our school? How can we, given the make up of the society in which we live.

The stories of Stephen and Paul that I will share with you shows the power if influence when we accommodate diversity.

- Paul
- Stephen

Similarly I grew from the challenges and became resilient and stronger and as a result of the interventions of a number of teachers and my parents who provided support and wise counsel that enabled me to achieve the outcomes I have set for myself.

That is why I am here today

However, not all students have that level of determination, and so the analogy of the fence indicates relevant lessons that educators need to consider when teaching culturally diverse students. In essence the nails are no different to the way in which the unique qualities of the individual are seen as deficits and are sometimes devalued.

Prior learning's and the unique qualities that have been developed over time when ignored, are seen as deficits. If they are not valued, not used and not built upon they will leave impressions that the strength of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, and the cultural capital the children bring with them to school, are of no value and should not be valued by teachers.

The reality is that when this occurs, like the holes in the fence, holes are created in a child's psyche and are hard to undo. Sometimes they leave an indelible mark or a sense of "I'm not valued".

The additional dimension for Aboriginal students is the compounding issue, which contribute to, and impact on for them is social, cultural, environmental, and economic and health factors which can all contributed to Aboriginal students being alienated and not achieving in the schooling process.

Equally for all Diversity groups the lack of a supportive school environment, the transiency or mobility of families, racism, harassment, peer pressure, poverty, lack of support structures from the home, homelessness, substance abuse, pregnancy, alienation from families and poor health can all be attributed to the need to provide intervention and support programs.

I want to suggest that maybe we take on the attributes of Socrates the masterly interrogator who established a method of trying to get at truth by persistent questioning. The very nature of what Socrates did makes him a disruptive and subversive influence. He was teaching people to question everything, and he was exposing the ignorance of individuals in power and authority.

Reading Socrates caused me to think about things in a questioning manner because he did more than any other individual to establish the principle that everything must be open to

question – there can be no cut and dried answers, because answers, like everything else, are themselves open to question. This approach is a way of getting people to re-examine what they think they already know. They can then make choices that can be used to influence solutions that will provide for the needs of students.

A teacher is a significant person in a student's life who is "bringing up a young person in" a systematic and education learning environment which enables the development of character; enhances an individual's qualities which they bring to the classroom, provide mental, emotional and social development, and should assist them as unique individuals who will make choices on their journey of education. As such, they will make a difference for children when they do not act as a nail. I want to use the words of Todd Rundgren to emphasise a point in respect to schooling, and I quote:

*So many people go through life without a direction or in a direction that is set.  
They just go from stop to stop, it's like they are on a bus and the only time they  
get off it to opt out.*

For periods of time our journey through life and schooling is very much like this quote. I believe Indigenous people lose faith and this results in our students getting off the bus. They vote with their feet and leave.

What prevails for them in the schooling sector is no longer relevant and they choose other options because as individuals they no longer enjoy their journey through the schooling and education pathways.

I want us to continue to provide a framework of education, which is inclusive of and acknowledges the cultural capital that students bring with them at the beginning of the schooling process, and allows their cultural capital to remain intact.

Through the Mind Matters Program we encourage support and a culture of learning to live together in order to participate and co-operate with others in all human activities. Learning to live together of course means learning about other people; their history, traditions and spiritual values, their similarities to us and their differences to us, this equally applies to many of us within our community; that there is a need to reconcile the differences in order for us to move forward as a collective group of people.

As a student my achievements should be gained within a mainstream framework of education, which, is inclusive of me as a unique individual and should acknowledge the

cultural capital that I as an individual bought with me at the beginning of my schooling. My cultural capital must be allowed to remain intact and enable me to retain the integrity that I believe that I am rightly entitled to.

I want to conclude by saying:

In a fleeting moment of interaction with a student, a teacher can leave an indelible impact on an individual that can last for a lifetime, shaping their thinking and influencing the way in which they personally succeed and interact with others around them.

Teachers hold a unique place within the community in which they live and teach because they influence future Australian societies. They are generally unassuming and need to appreciate that the children they teach today shape the directions for tomorrow which contributes to the essence of our way of life, our culture, an individual's integrity, the compassion, respect and consideration they show to others and more importantly the valuing of themselves as resilient and worthy.

Through using the Mind Matters materials teachers secure the coping strategies they impart to all students.

For Students it establishes a foundation that provides them with the toolkit to be resilient and cope adequately with the dimensions of life, which bring a range of challenges that can be dealt with emotional lucidity. They enjoy the company of those around them; make balanced choices as well as considering responsibilities against the rights of themselves and others. They develop a repertoire of resilience and coping skills, which enable them to remain in control of their social and emotional well-being and increase individual capacity reaching out to assist others.

The development of an inquiring mind of any individual and providing them with the skills to cope for every facet of life through considered advice and teachings is a precious gift because the individual develops knowledge, skills and values that equips them for an ever changing future.

They acquire the competence to adapt and cope whilst remaining essentially the character shaped by family, friends, work colleagues but more importantly by the teachers, who cared and gave of their knowledge, imparted values and provide wise counsel.

Teachers acknowledge the past but teach in the present to shape the future of the children entrusted to their care.

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